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EDITORIAL:

How not to build a bridge

ALL THE politicians and bureaucrats with a hand in the beleaguered Bay Bridge rebuilding project agree on a few key points. They all speak with a sense of urgency about the need to finish the job quickly, before construction costs spiral even higher and — just as urgently — before the next big earthquake hits the vulnerable existing eastern span.

So why is the project stalled, at a cost of \$400,000 a day, over disagreements on how to build and pay for the rest of the project?

In a word, stubbornness.

The Schwarzenegger administration continues to play hardball with its insistence that the Bay Area tear up its plans for a signature single-tower suspension section just east of Yerba Buena Island. The administration maintains that it would be cheaper and faster to simplify the design as a plain skyway from the island to the shore of the East Bay.

Sunne Wright McPeak, the governor's secretary of business, housing and transportation, came to The Chronicle's editorial board Thursday to make the case for the skyway option. McPeak went through all the theoretical reasons why the skyway could shave about \$500 million off the cost of the short stretch of the bridge that currently calls for a graceful but technically complex suspension plan. She also argued that the skyway could be completed by 2011, which is the most optimistic schedule for the project with the tower.

If these arguments all sound familiar, it's because they've been going on for a decade.

Besides, there are reasons to question whether a major plan change at this point — starting over on the design, permitting and environmental review processes — would actually save time or money.

The Schwarzenegger administration's swaggering assertions that the skyway would reap a big savings —

and present less risk of engineering complications or cost overruns — would be more convincing if the governor backed them up with real dollars. Instead, it has proposed that Bay Area residents cover about 75 percent of any cost overruns with higher tolls.

It is important to note that the skyway portion of the project — stretching 1.3 miles and now about 70 percent complete — is now running more than 60 percent over budget.

Senate President Pro Tem Don Perata, D-Oakland, and Sen. Tom Torlakson, D-Antioch, have been pushing a plan to use a combination of toll increases and a state transportation bond to cover the \$3 billion in cost overruns. The Perata-Torlakson plan would maintain the suspension design — but require that any further cost overruns would be covered by tolls. Torlakson's measure to authorize the \$1 toll increase, which would cover about 53 percent of the cost, cleared the Senate on a 22-15 vote Thursday.

Even as Torlakson's bill (SB172) advanced toward Schwarzenegger's desk, McPeak dismissed it as "a nonstarter" because of the governor's concern about the state's debt load.

Meanwhile, work on the .38-mile portion of the bridge that was supposed to include the tower has been put on hold while the politicians squabble. "We can't do anything more until we get a decision and get a funding package," McPeak said.

Our point exactly.

The governor and legislative leaders need to get in a room and stay there until they can break this stalemate. We suggest just two conditions. (1) The word "nonstarter" should be banned. (2) Anyone who claims to have a "better idea" than the designed and approved one should be prepared to offer a financial guarantee that the promised savings will be realized.